NI Battery 2

Graeme Hague calls in the band's drummer, then sends him down to the pub for more beer.

No one would dare say that the practice of using a real, live drummer in the studio is dead, but you might agree the concept is cornered, bleeding and getting a bit twitchy-eyed. Sure, we'll never replace the creativity and improvisation of a talented player. However, for many smaller studios the logistics of setting up and recording a good drummer have always been daunting. It's easier – too easy now – to use a drum sampler with precise sequencing instead. You can create great drum tracks on your own and still keep most of the beer for yourself.

Personally, I've been trying to 'kill off' our percussive friends for a long time. It took the original version of Native Instruments' Battery to make me finally consign my trusty Alesis D4 to that pile of equipment all engineers have… the gear you'll never use again but can never sell because you *never know*, right?

Today I've got Battery 2 in front of me and I'm keen to make lots of loud noise. It was good software to start with and led the field in the race between drum samplers. So what has Native Instruments done to stay competitive in a market that's now got the likes of FXpansion's BFD, I hear you asking?

Matrix Reloaded

For those readers unfamiliar with the basic design of Battery, all the samples are sorted by a matrix of 'cells' like a chessboard. Each square is a cell and within this you can assign up to 128 samples. A common example would be a kick drum cell with a wide range of samples from a soft tap through to a heavy stomp. Each sample is given a velocity range and triggered according to the appropriate Midi signal input. The individual cells are also attributed with note values (D1, C3, etc) and have their own parameters like volume, panning and some extra editing we'll get into a bit later. Cells can be moved around easily to suit any project taking their information with them.

The matrix design comes into its own when you want to apply effects to more than one cell. It's not crucial, since Battery 2 does allow you to choose non-contiguous cells with the standard Windows "Ctrl-click" and apply global edits (most Mac conventions work, too), but the idea is to have, say, all your tom drums in one entire column or row allowing you to easily choose them together as a group and tweak things overall. And while we're on the subject, Battery 2 also has Voice Groups for muting associated cells, like hi-hats for example, so an open hat is chopped off by a subsequent closed hat hit… and so on.

New Kits on the Block

Some of the new kits that come with Battery 2 illustrate well how the matrix approach can work. In the Acoustic Kit the folks at Native Instruments have included samples of each instrument strike recorded by overhead, room, PZM and 'trash' mics as well, with all of these triggered by the same Note value. For instance, the snare drum is a combination of six samples heard at once (the first two are top and bottom close dynamic mics), but with the matrix layout giving you all the overheads, PZM samples etc in a row, you can mute these mics for the entire kit with a single click. The overall result of these multiple

samples, by the way, is an excellent and very natural sounding kit.

If you want to get radical, new Battery 2 features give you interesting choices – and remember, these can be applied to individual instruments, groups, or the entire kit. First there's a nice compressor with standard presets and settings, but the parameters can be set to extremes. An added filter/equaliser is also very usable with standard Band types plus a Phase Filter and Vowel A & B Filter. And a detailed modulation router has been introduced for people who like to make things really complicated. Options carried over from Battery 1 (in fact, I can't pick that anything's taken away) are Tune for altering the pitch of each cell, an interesting Saturation setting that adds a little bite, a Bit Rate adjustment to make things 'lo-fi' and Hertz for twiddling with the sample rate. Any of these effects, or a combination of them, can turn a squeaky-clean studio kit into something wacky and outrageous. Wherever your imagination takes you.

Cells can also contain loops, with a maximum of four samples per loop. The usual editing can be applied to make anything you want, or simple looping can be used for just increasing the decay of a cymbal, for instance.

Last in the new armoury is a graphical interface for each cell to assist in mapping out samples. Previously it was awkward defining velocity ranges and such. Now it's a simple click-and-drag operation.

Assault with Battery

It all adds up to thoughtful improvements and Battery 2 being even more a versatile and capable piece of software for dedicated drum programmers – but I think therein lies a distinction. While the included drum kits do sound bloody good, Battery 2 isn't quite an "awesome-drum-sound-straight-out-of-the-box" kind of product. It's easy to use and the interface is certainly intuitive, but this is a powerful tool to satisfy demanding programmers. Yes, the provided kits are great and offer an excellent range of orchestral and ethnic percussion too, but if you're hoping that some downloaded Midi file will be magically turned into Simon Phillips-like brilliance at the press of a plug-in, think again.

Every sampler is only as good as the samples you load into it and Battery 2 comes with nearly 4GB of them. But Battery 1 owners beware – many of the samples and kits are the original Battery 1 drums repackaged. You won't be getting too much that's new. Having said that, Battery 1 users wanting to move with the times can upgrade to Battery 2 for $199.

A small trap that tricked me – panic set in as I believed the suppliers hadn't included the sample libraries. Until I realised it was an Installation *DVD* I was holding – yes, DVD, not a CD. No problems for yours truly, but some buyers might not have a DVD drive in their DAWs yet.

Battery 2 handles 32-bit sampling and 256 voices, asks for at least a Pentium III 400MHz and 256MB of RAM. The top sample rate is 96k. Native Instruments provides a PC and Mac version and has hugely increased the imported formats it supports, but check for yourself, if it matters. There's the odd grumbling around a few forums relating to the Mac version getting the hiccups on some imports. There's already an important 2.1 update which addresses a few minor bugs and gives users a set of 'All' kits, meaning all the kick drums, all the snares and so on in one kit for auditioning, which brings me to a small disappointment – you can't open more than one kit at a time. A good File Browser is provided with a variety of options, but really the process of building a new drum kit from cells you like in existing sets requires copying elements, closing that kit and opening your new one, pasting, going back and *re-opening* the first drum kit… you get the idea. All a bit tedious really. And there's no reverb in the effects either. Granted, Battery 2 gives you 16 outputs for either physical or virtual busses and most users would prefer to insert a reverb plug-in of choice over these anyway, but it's kind of surprising that in a drum sampler you can't recreate that infamous Phil Collins snare slap.

Oh, and the manual's index has chapters going up to page 89 when there's only 60 in the entire book (and PDF version)! There's a drummer's joke about counting beyond four here somewhere.

But you can ignore these minor annoyances, because Battery 2 is ultimately good in most areas and excellent in others – something we've come to expect from Native Instruments. Maybe that cornered drummer can sneak a breath of relief, because drum samplers like Battery 2 still don't come with sticks and can't dash out for a slab of cold beer during the vocal tracks. Not yet, anyway…

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